



The Enlisted Perspective

By CMSAF Gerald R. Murray

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First Sergeants: Filling the Vacancies

You've heard it before, and it's true; our enlisted force is the best in the world and the envy of Air Forces around the globe. Over the years, through education, experience, and leadership training, we've developed strong and highly effective enlisted leaders. These leaders are a key component of our continuing success.

To maintain our edge, it's important that we continually review and update the way we develop our airmen into senior enlisted leaders of the future. Force Development is helping us do that by looking at the way we educate, train and assign our people. While we continue to push forward in this arena, it's important that we also keep a focus on programs that have been a mainstay of our enlisted force.

Once such program is our first sergeant corps. The first sergeant is one of the original enlisted leadership positions created under General George Washington. The position has evolved dramatically since then, but it remains a critical leadership position that is directly tied to the success of our Air Force and the airmen who fill its ranks. Throughout history, first sergeants have enforced standards, maintained good order and discipline, and given great care to our enlisted airmen.

Despite evolution, first sergeants continue to be unit-level, senior leaders. In a time of sustained high operations tempo, first sergeants are critical to properly lead and care for our force. I am greatly concerned that we currently have over 130 squadrons without trained first sergeants. We've struggled with this problem for over a decade, and it's time we take action to correct the trend.

Last year we revamped the way we manage first sergeants following years of review and inputs from the field. The changes have successfully spread our critical first sergeant manning across the Air Force. The next step is to fill the vacancies.

I believe the Air Force has the finest first sergeants in the Department of Defense. We've maintained this status through an all-volunteer program. Our only failure has been in getting enough volunteers to fill these critical requirements. It is the only leadership position where we have accepted vacancies. We do not allow a squadron to go without a squadron commander, and we will now take action to ensure we don't allow a squadron to go without a first sergeant.

To do this, we are revamping our first sergeant selection program. The foundation of this program will continue to be volunteerism. However, because volunteers only filled

66 percent of our requirements during Fiscal Year 03, the new program will identify some of our top master sergeants and make them first sergeants. In November, we'll notify approximately 400 master sergeants that they have been identified as candidates.

These individuals will be interviewed, receive orientation briefings, and be recommended by their local leadership. Following that process, we will then select 120 of these candidates to attend the First Sergeant Academy and serve as first sergeants for three years. Because volunteerism is so important, individuals will be able to indicate that they are a volunteer to ensure they are one of the 120 selectees.

For those who are identified; it is no mistake. Your records show that you are among the best master sergeants in our Air Force and that you have what it takes to successfully lead our enlisted corps. We need you to step up to this challenge. I assure you that it will expand your horizons and give you opportunities to lead that will enhance your leadership as a Senior NCO. Along the way you'll develop leadership and management skills that will prepare you for even greater challenges and give you invaluable experience to take back to your career field at the end of your first sergeant tour. My hope is that your selection will make you proud to be recognized as one of the best.

For commanders, OICs, Chiefs, and supervisors of those identified and those who wish to volunteer; I ask that you support them fully. Don't think of their selection as a loss to your squadron, work center, or career field. As with all first sergeants, they will have the opportunity to return to their primary AFSC at the end of their tour if they choose. Career field functional managers will have the opportunity to bring them back if manning dictates they are needed. Losing them will be hard, but I encourage you to think of the more experienced leader you will get back. If their loss is truly detrimental to the mission, commanders will have a method to request deferment or exemptions.

It's important to understand that we are not creating two separate application processes. The new first sergeant selection program will accommodate individuals who volunteer for first sergeant duty as well as those selected for first sergeant duty. The new program also eliminates the formal shadow and boarding programs in favor of a streamlined process designed to ensure all candidates receive timely, fair, and equal consideration.

We're not paving new ground. Recruiters, military training leaders and military training instructors are successfully selected with this approach. With the right involvement from commanders, command chiefs, and first sergeants, as well as the support of supervisors at all levels, I know we'll be just as successful in this endeavor.

Senior NCOs who are proven leaders will do what our great enlisted men and women do everyday. They will step up to the challenge and do great things.




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